

FIVE BEST

WSJ 3/25/06

Historian **Victor Davis Hanson** selects the definitive books on epic 20th-century battles

1 The Price of Glory

By Alistair Horne

St. Martin's, 1963

Over the course of 10 months in 1916, the French and Germans killed or wounded about 1.25 million of their best soldiers in a few wooded acres around a fortress complex near the French town of Verdun on the Western Front. Alistair Horne graphically describes the sheer physics of the human carnage, yet the battle was not entirely madness: The Germans had a diabolical plan to bleed the French white, and both sides saw that a German breakthrough at Verdun might prove catastrophic for the Allies. Thanks to Horne's brilliance, Verdun is now seared in the popular memory as a slaughterhouse where well-meaning but often clueless 19th-century generals, usually from a safe distance, threw the youth of the 20th century into an inferno.

2 With the Old Breed

By E.B. Sledge

Presidio, 1981

There are some brilliant memoirs of the savage battle for Okinawa, but E.B. Sledge's is by far the most haunting. Sledge, who landed with the Marines on both Okinawa and Peleliu islands, describes in matter-of-fact prose how the superior discipline and bonds between fellow Marines overcame the often brilliant fighting of the desperate Japanese, who hugely outnumbered the Americans and fought from impenetrable subterranean concrete and coral-covered gun emplacements. "With the Old Breed" might serve as an antiwar ode, but the book ends by reminding the reader how well the U.S. was served in its hour of need by rare men such as his own—men that Sledge thinks it may well need again.

3 The Face of Battle

By John Keegan

This exploration of the soldiers' experience at Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme—all within a few miles of each other in the cockpit of Europe—introduced the young military historian John Keegan to the wider American public. Readers were fascinated with Keegan's excursus on human qualities such as fear and honor, the effect of steel and shot on flesh, and the way men ate, kept warm and armed before battle. "The Face of Battle" ushered in a new genre of military history known as the "experience of battle." Yet other efforts to convey ground-eye views of battle from antiquity to the present have never matched the level of detail and anguish, or the literary artistry, of Keegan's acknowledged masterpiece.

4 Stalingrad

By Antony Beevor

Penguin, 1998

We in the West cannot quite comprehend what really went on in this distant battle of Armageddon that began in late 1942, but Antony Beevor provides an extraordinary account of a terrible conflict where the Nazis' tanks met the Soviets' T-34s, the Luftwaffe's best encountered skies full of rockets, and a million Russians fought the last crack troops that an exhausted Germany and Eastern Europe could throw at them. Soldiers on both sides accepted that capture meant either an immediate death or one far more grotesque from disease and starvation in frigid detention camps. At Stalingrad the Russians proved the better tacticians and even had the superior generals, ending for good any crazy notions that the Germans would go farther east.

5 The Fall of Fortresses

By Elmer Bendiner

Putnam, 1980

This too often overlooked memoir is the best personal account of American daylight bombing over Germany. The calm and reflective Elmer Bendiner, a navigator on a B-17 "Flying Fortress," describes how the Army Air Corps in Western Europe asked bomber crews to do the impossible: fly in daylight without escort into the face of thousands of German fighters and experienced flak batteries. More than 25,000 airmen did not come home. This book, framed around the nightmarish second Schweinfurt sortie, shows how the crews' high élan and skill fostered persistence despite perceived hopelessness. Bendiner reminds us in stark prose that, especially in the war's early years, the enemy enjoyed advantages of equipment, command and terrain; we simply had superior morale—and more flexible and innovative soldiers, who deeply believed that things would finally get better.

Dr. Hanson is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. His most recent book is "A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War" (Random House, 2005).

Aug 12-13, 2006

FIVE BEST

Historian **Stanley Weintraub** hails these firsthand tales of World War II in the Pacific

1 Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo

By Ted Lawson
Random House, 1943

Following Pearl Harbor and further catastrophes early in World War II, President Roosevelt proposed a mission to give America a psychological lift: an audacious bombing run on Japan. Crews for 16 bombers were trained and led by Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle, a former test pilot with an engineering doctorate from MIT. In "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo," Ted Lawson, who was at the controls of one of the planes, gives a breathtaking account of how the twin-engine B-25s, each loaded with four 500-pound bombs, roared over Japan at tree-top level on April 18, 1942, and successfully struck the enemy's capital city. This affront to Japanese pride helped spur the country's disastrous plunge two months later into the Battle of Midway, the turnabout of the Pacific War.

2 Baa Baa Black Sheep

By Gregory Boyington
Putnam, 1958

Marine Fighting Squadron 214 was known as the "Black Sheep" because it had been cobbled together from replacement pilots by the pugnacious Gregory "Pappy" Boyington. The rag-tag but deadly squadron lost its colorful leader—a drinker and brawler on the ground, an ace in the air—when Boyington was shot down in early 1944 in the South Pacific. Captured by the Japanese and badly injured, he somehow survived 20 months of prison-camp brutality. For a decade after the war, the Medal of Honor winner lived on beer, bombast and brag. But then he produced "Baa Baa Black Sheep." Based on records of his missions, embellished and cocky in some places, ruefully self-deprecating in others, the book tells a story that might not be as it really was but is as it should have been.

3 **Darkness**

By William Manchester
Little, Brown, 1979

William L. Shirer lauded this "gripping, haunting book" as "the most moving memoir of combat in World War II that I have ever read." It remains hard to fault that judgment. Determined to exorcise his postwar nightmares by writing them away, William Manchester returned in 1978 to the Pacific islands where he had lost his youth and nearly his life during the horrific battle at Okinawa. A Marine sergeant, he received a "million-dollar wound" that got him evacuated, saving him for writing history, including his own. He confesses that he had become "a thing of tears and twitchings and dirtied pants. I remembered wondering dumbly, Is this what they mean by 'conspicuous gallantry'?" "Goodbye, Darkness" is written with conspicuous gallantry.

4 **The Railway Man**

By Eric Lomax
Norton, 1995

If the bridge over the river Kwai hadn't been made legendary by the Oscar-winning film of that title, this book might have done the job. Eric Lomax, a Scot with a passion for trains, was captured in Singapore during the war and forced into slave labor. During his years of torture and starvation, one of his tormentors was an English-speaking overseer whom Lomax never forgot. Savagely beaten, Lomax lived a hideous existence, nursing his hatred long afterward—until in 1989 a friend showed him a Japan Times story about his captor, now in Buddhist atonement for war atrocities. Almost 50 years after his release, Lomax and his wife met the aged, frail Takashi Nagase at the bridge on the Kwai. Recognizing that Nagase's Buddhism made it essential that he be forgiven before he died, the ex-POW parted movingly from his former enemy. Lomax writes with quiet dignity, but his pity and the exaltation recall Greek tragedy.

5 **Hiroshima**

By John Hersey
Knopf, 1946

Based on interviews with six atomic-bomb survivors, "Hiroshima" relates, with passionate dispassion, their experiences on the morning of the blast and its grim aftermath. (The account was first published in August 1946, when it filled an entire issue of the *New Yorker*.) Hersey offers no personal conclusions—he lets the victims do that, and their thoughts range from pain and anger and indifference to a concession that the Bomb "ended the bloodshed." Immensely moving in its flat tone, which belies its immediacy, "Hiroshima" may be the most unforgettable work of journalism in the 20th century.

Mr. Weintraub's "Eleven Days in December: Christmas at the Bulge, 1944" (Free Press) will be published in November.

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Present at the Devastation: A New Eyewitness to History

First Into Nagasaki

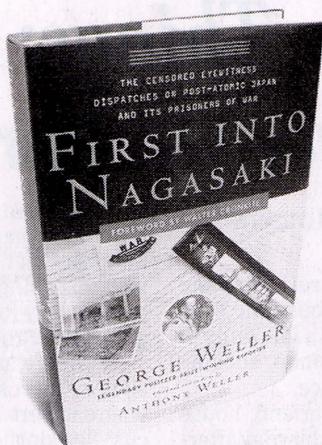
By George Weller
Edited by Anthony Weller
(Crown, 320 pages, \$25)

The atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki on the morning of Aug. 9, 1945. On Sept. 6, George Weller of the Chicago Daily News, fresh from covering the formal surrender of Japan aboard the USS Missouri, arrived in the city. He got there by impersonating an American colonel and forcing his way onto Japanese trains. He was the first Westerner to enter Nagasaki after the bomb.

By heading for Nagasaki, Weller was following his nose for news but also defying a ban imposed by Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who had declared Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu, where Nagasaki is located, off-limits to journalists. Weller reasoned that the war was over, the U.S. military's authority over journalists was now moot, and he ought to be free to travel wherever his story took him.

But MacArthur had the last word. Weller's dispatches, filed through U.S. censors in Tokyo, never reached Chicago. Weller always assumed that they landed in the general's circular file. It wasn't until after the reporter's death, in 2002, that his son, Anthony, discovered the carbon copies of his father's never-published stories, buried in a box of files that had followed the peripatetic correspondent around the globe. The result is "First Into Nagasaki," compiled by the younger Mr. Weller and edited by him into a powerful set of historical documents. His intelligent concluding essay provides the framework for his father's raw copy.

The most striking aspect of the Weller dispatches is their immediacy. "Walk in Nagasaki's streets and you walk in ruins" is how his first report begins, as he describes the sights and smells of the devastated city, where pyres are still burning



with the remains of humans killed in the attack. Yet "Nagasaki cannot be described as a city of the dead. . . . Though the smashed streets are as barren of production or commerce as Pompeii's, yet a living stream of humanity pours along them, looking with alert, shoe-button eyes for today's main chance."

It is a month after the bomb, and Weller, hearing rumors about what we now know to be radiation sickness, heads to two local hospitals to see what he can find out. He interviews doctors perplexed by how to treat "Disease X," which is killing people who appeared to have survived the blast unharmed. He reports the conditions of the patients he sees there in a spare, descriptive style. "Men, women and children with no outward marks of injury are dying daily in hospitals," he writes on Sept. 8, "some after having walked around for three or four weeks thinking they have escaped. . . . The doctors [say] . . . the answer to the malady is beyond them. Their patients, though their skins are whole, are simply passing away under their eyes."

The after-effects of the atomic bomb aren't the only story that Weller finds in Nagasaki. After a few days in the city, he heads to the nearby prisoner-of-war camps, where he has what can only be called the incredible experience of inform-

ing his fellow Americans, who did not know the war had ended, of the two atomic bombs, the Japanese surrender and the impending arrival of American occupation troops.

He writes a series of harrowing reports based on interviews with hundreds of American, British, Dutch and Australian soldiers interned there under appalling conditions. The younger Mr. Weller calls historians' lack of attention to the Japanese POW camps "one of the great omissions in World War II memory." After reading his father's shocking dispatches, one finds it hard not to agree. A third of Allied prisoners died in Japan's POW camps, the younger Mr. Weller says, compared with 4% in Germany's.

George Weller also writes about the "Death Cruise," one of the 200 or so "hellship voyages" that transported POWs from Southeast Asia to Japan between 1942 and 1945. Weller pieced together the lengthy account included here from stories told to him by the POWs he interviewed in Kyushu. A sanitized version was published in the Chicago Daily News, minus horrific details regarding Japanese brutalities and the cannibalism and vampirism that some prisoners resorted to in order to survive. Anthony Weller reports that of the roughly 50,000 prisoners who traveled by hellship during the war, some 21,000 died.

"First Into Nagasaki" is no "Hiroshima," John Hersey's famous 1946 account of atomic-bomb survivors that has been taken up by antinuclear activists. Weller doesn't flinch from describing the suffering of the Japanese victims of the bomb, but it is clear where his sympathies lie. In a 1967 essay for an anthology of reporters' memoirs, he relates his experiences in Nagasaki. "I felt pity," he writes, "but no remorse. The Japanese military had cured me of that."

Ms. Kirkpatrick is a deputy editor of the Journal's editorial page.

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WSJ Nov. 29, 105

The Ultimate—and Unnecessary—Sacrifice

We're not very good at celebrating our military heroes. Memorial Day and Veterans Day pass with less and less public acknowledgment, beyond a general holiday feeling. Around June 6, when the president goes to France to observe the anniversary of D-Day, there will be some notice of Normandy veterans. But no one will even pause to contemplate the anniversary two days before—Midway Day, the official commemorative day of the U.S. Navy. It marks one of our nation's most dazzling feats of arms, just six months after the disastrous surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Battle of Midway on June 4, 1942, was a close-run thing. The U.S. Navy was inferior to its enemy in almost every way—particularly in quality of aircraft and knowledge of carrier tactics. Luck and daring carried the day. Alvin Kernan saw this at first-hand. He was an 18-year-old aviation ordnanceman assigned to the torpedo squadron on the carrier Enterprise. He had joined the Navy in March 1941, when the Depression had left him few options after high school.

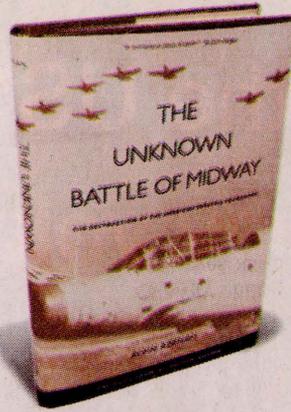
Mr. Kernan's "Crossing the Line" (1994), a memoir about his five years of

Douglas TBD-1 Devastator torpedo bomber was even worse and was already being replaced by the time of Midway. Torpedo pilots, moreover, had to deal with the fact that their torpedoes generally failed in use—either to swim at all or, if a hit was made by chance, to explode. The "tin fish" were also in such short supply that none of the 51 torpedo pilots who flew into battle on June 4 had ever dropped a live torpedo in practice.

The Yorktown, with its experience from the Battle of the Coral Sea, managed to get its squadrons off in an organized manner, but Hornet's dive bombers and fighters were led on a mistaken heading and completely missed the Japanese fleet. Only the torpedo planes under the command of Lt. Cmdr. John Waldron—the hero of Mr. Kernan's book—found the enemy. Waldron had argued with his superiors about the heading and in the end flew his squadron alone to the Japanese fleet.

Every one of the 15 undefended planes was shot down. The Enterprise's torpedo planes suffered a similar fate: Ten of 14 were lost. In the aerial confusion of launch, the Enterprise's fighters actually flew to the Japanese fleet with Waldron's squadron but were awaiting a signal to engage from a squadron that didn't know what signal to send. The fighters flew above the battle until they ran low on gas and returned to their carrier.

The Yorktown's organized squadrons and the Enterprise's dive bombers arrived at about the same moment. Lt. Cmdr. John Thach's six fighters man-



The men were brave. The equipment and training were woefully inadequate.

aged to engage more than a dozen Zeros while trying to defend Yorktown's Devastators on their attack run, but the results were the same for the torpedo planes: 10 of 12 lost. The dive bombers, though, did their work magnificently, and within minutes the Akagi, Kaga and Soryu were in flames. (The Hiryu escaped and sent her planes off to do near-mortal damage to the Yorktown before she too was sunk by dive bombers.)

Mr. Kernan brings this maritime battle superbly to life. He ex-

plains the whole history of the U.S. carriers and their arsenal and the commanders and pilots who were trying to learn on the job. And he narrates the air assault in gripping detail. Mr. Kernan makes it clear how it came to pass that U.S. admirals sent a large group of brave but poorly equipped and under-trained men to fight with outmoded tactics. He is less clear on why. One obvious explanation: At the beginning of a war, you fight with whatever is at hand and learn from your mistakes. Adm. Nimitz would have happily accepted double the casualty rate to get what he got: four sunk Japanese carriers.

Midway was a great victory, but the Navy still had miles to go to figure out how to use and defend its carriers—as the costly mistakes in the sea battles around Guadalcanal in late 1942 proved. Mr. Kernan has done us a real service by bringing this all to light in a compact and elegant book. He has done his shipmates on the "Big E" proud.

Mr. Messenger is senior editor of The New York Sun.

THE UNKNOWN BATTLE OF MIDWAY

By Alvin Kernan

(Yale University Press, 181 pages, \$26)

service in the Pacific carrier fleet, is one of the classic books about World War II. "The Unknown Battle of Midway" is a memoir and more: It examines the horrific casualties suffered by the four U.S. torpedo squadrons at Midway. Of 51 planes, only seven returned, and 98 of the 127 crewmen were killed—and they scored no hits on Japanese ships. History has it that the torpedo planes' sacrifice cleared the way for the success of the U.S. dive bombers: And indeed, the dive bombers sank four Japanese carriers. But it was an unnecessary sacrifice, Mr. Kernan argues, brought on by mistakes and inexperience.

Adm. Chester Nimitz knew that the Japanese were sailing on Midway and sent out all his carriers—Enterprise, Hornet and Yorktown—to lay an ambush. They were to rendezvous, scout out the Japanese carriers and hit them with every plane they could get into the air. Carrier tactics called for a combined strike by three air groups. Fighters would engage the enemy's combat air patrol; the dive bombers would attack a ship directly, engaging its defenses; and the slow torpedo planes would slip in at sea level to finish it off.

The Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber was a superb plane, but the Grumman F4F Wildcat shipboard fighter was slower and far less maneuverable than the Japanese Zero—and guzzled gas at a rate that limited its range. The

Time Off / Photography

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